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## The Role of the University:

## Ivory Tower, Service Station, or Frontier Post?

THIS ISSUE of *Dædalus* deals with the governance of the university. The term governance recalls the word *gouvernail* or rudder: that which steers a vessel toward its goal. One can describe the rudder and its operation without any assumptions as to the destination of the ship. But is that the interesting problem? In dealing with the governance of the university, are we not asking at least as much where it goes as how it gets there?

A more significant, although still imperfect, analogy is that of biological evolution. Biochemistry and physiology tell us how organisms function, whereas evolutionary biology tells us how the organisms that exist came to be, and why they appear to be so well adapted to the existing conditions as to give to evolution its seemingly purposive and to some extent predictable character. The purposiveness of evolution is only an apparent one: It stems from the passive adaptiveness of living organisms to their environment. In social phenomena, including the conduct of the university, a dimension other than structure and history enters the picture: the dimension of conscious purpose. Man sets goals and tries to fit the means to those goals. Thus, the goals of the university at any given stage of society must dictate its structure, even though vestiges of obsolete structures may remain as tokens of the past— such as the pageantry of commencements and of football games.

If the goals of a university must dictate its structure, what determines the goals themselves? Inevitably these goals and the set of values that underlies them reflect the values and goals of the society around the university. The critical question is the nature of the reflection. Is it to be an undistorted, uncritical reflection, like that of a plane mirror whose function is simply to reproduce what is presented to it? Or a protective reflection, like

that of an insulating surface that excludes external influences from the interior of an object? Or a critical reflection that analyzes the input of external signals and filters it through a discriminating system of evaluative devices?

In less fanciful terms, the key question for any institution, and for the university in particular, is its ethical interaction with the society in which it operates. This interaction may result in acceptance of the predominant values, which become identified as the university's own; or it may lead to a rejection of society's values and a withdrawal into the traditional ivory tower; or it may generate a critical, creative relation between society and university. It is the thesis of this article that the latter kind of interaction both befits the university and ultimately benefits society the most. It is an interaction that requires, on the part of the university, a complex mixture of commitments: commitment, on the one hand, to being a creative force in the historical process, deeply and passionately involved in the affairs of society, and, on the other hand, to providing society with the intellectual stewardship that can come only from rigorous, dispassionate analysis of reality.

Traditionally, our universities have had three functions—education, scholarship, and service. In earlier times, the educative and scholarly functions were closely allied, and the service function was only a minor one. In the complex technological society of today, the service functions have grown enormously, and the educational and scholarly functions (at least in the natural and social sciences) have come increasingly close to the service functions. The university provides society with experts and expertise. The reasons for these changes are to be found not only in the demands of society to which the university responds, but also in the fact that the organization of the university and its sources of livelihood reflect the structural organization of our society itself. This has generated the entrepreneurial system of the American university, in which the policy-initiating bodies—both administrations and faculties—acting in the manner of capitalist entrepreneurs have become actively and competitively involved in seeking out what kinds of intellectual pursuits society could use (and therefore be willing to support) and in developing the corresponding programs of research, education, and service. Unquestionably, this entrepreneurial system has contributed to make the American university the flourishing and effective institution that it is today. In fact, this aspect of the American university

provides a model for many of the reforms now attempted in Europe and elsewhere to make universities in those countries more efficient and more responsive to social realities.

But the entrepreneurial system, for all its productive activism, has an inherently passive quality. Drawing its inspiration from the surrounding society, it asks itself only what it can do for society *as it is*, rather than what role it can play in the evolution of society. Yet, many people believe that the university has a critical responsibility to interact with society in an active rather than a passive role. One may even go further and state that, in a society that is losing its traditional religious-metaphysical sources of values, the university, as the institution charged with the intellectual and educational formation of the youth, has the responsibility of stepping into the resulting vacuum and providing the seat of the search for new functional sets of values. In brief, the university must be prepared to be the intellectual and ethical forum of the lay society.

The great religions of humanity—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Marxism-Leninism—even though they embodied realistic reactions to social situations existing at a given time, inevitably became immobilized in dogmatic, authoritarian codes of intellectual beliefs and moral behaviors because of their metaphysical assumptions. The challenge of technological society, with its rapidly changing objective situations, poses the problem of generating an evolutionary system of values suitable to such an unprecendented social environment. A biological analogy can provide some useful hints.

Biological evolution is an essentially opportunistic process. It selects what is fit (that is, reproductively successful) in *the immediate present*. Yet what is finally selected are those lines of descent that remain fit (in the same reproductive sense) over longer times, even in changing situations. Thus, evolution selects populations for adaptability (the capacity to tolerate a range of situations) and for plasticity (the ability to respond to changing situations with a change in genetic structure). Both of these properties are functions of the range of genetic endowments present in a population. Any biological analogy to social phenomena is bound to be somewhat distorted because social and cultural evolution does not duplicate biological evolution. Cultural evolution is Lamarckian—treasuring its acquired characters—and is deeply influenced by conscious purpose, whereas biological evolution is Darwinian and knows only causes, not purposes. Yet both pro-

cesses have one feature in common: the role of adaptability and plasticity in determining long-run fitness. If a culture and a society are to flourish, their conceptual and ethical frameworks must fit the real and changing environment. Hence, these frameworks must be adaptable, plastic, intrinsically self-critical, and persistently self-revising. No agency in society is better suited to carry out the function of criticism and revision than the university, permeated as it is (or should be) with the spirit of free inquiry and the commitment to factual truth.

There is a danger that the plasticity of social attitudes and ethical values may be interpreted in a purely automatic way. Plasticity can mean several different things: a creative sensitivity and responsiveness to changing environmental conditions, or a passive submission to external pressures, or an aimless swaying with the winds of change. The third interpretation leads to acquiescence with and encouragement of all sorts of faddism; the second, to the very identification with the societal establishment that the entrepreneurial activities of universities tend to foster. Passive acceptance of the goals and values of society deprives the university of the claim to intellectual leadership and encourages its involvement in ventures of dubious ethical and intellectual value.

It is interesting to note here that adoption by the university of a passive attitude toward society as a source of values differs little in its consequences from the opposite choice—to ignore such values and to live in a self-centered illusion of spiritual purity. Withdrawal into the ivory tower amounts in practice to an endorsement of the *status quo*. In fact, by removing a large segment of intellectually alert individuals from the field of actual involvement in the affairs of society, the attitude of the ivory tower encourages the use of rational knowledge for irrational purposes. The scholar who scorns involvement in the life of the commonwealth assumes a burden of responsibility for the misuses to which the products of his scholarship may be put by the society from which he has supposedly kept himself aloof.

The remaining alternative is for the universities to accept openly an active role in social experimentation. Even though to do so represents a departure from some cherished illusions of neutrality and detachment, it amounts only to acknowledging the real situation and making the university's role in society less ambiguous. The university today is a major business enterprise, pre-

empting facilities of increasing magnitude and competing with other sectors of the community for funds and *Lebensraum*. Moreover, through its service functions, whether carried out institutionally or by individuals, the university plays a much greater role in the affairs of society than many of its members are willing to admit. But this role has too often been a passive rather than a creative one—that of a service station rather than a frontier post. The university will be on sounder ground if it makes its role in social affairs explicit and creative by exploring the problems of society in the spirit of free, critical experimentation that has characterized its involvement in the natural sciences. In fact, such an approach to society's problems is clearly appropriate to the university's mission of intellectual stewardship.

The tasks that face the investigator in the social sciences are, of course, different from those encountered in the natural sciences. The natural scientist searches for the laws that rule events in the world of material objects, inanimate or living. Understanding of these laws allows prediction of future events under defined conditions and permits the evolution of a technology directed to the solution of specific practical tasks. Engineering and medicine are typical technological outgrowths of natural science. In their technical content (not in their applications!), these outgrowths are as value-free and socially neutral as their parent sciences. They are part of the intellectual enterprise of man, which aims both at understanding the world we are part of and at developing means to control and alter it. How these means are then used is where the problem of responsibility comes into play.

The social sciences attempt, in principle, to follow the same patterns, searching for laws that rule human events and deriving predicting schemes, on the basis of which a social technology may evolve. But here the distinctions are more easily blurred. The perception of social events and their interpretation are deeply influenced by the fact that the social scientist is part of the society that he studies. Furthermore, experimentation in the affairs of society can seldom be done under the relatively neutral conditions available to the natural scientist since all experimentation involves active involvement in the process of social change. The question of responsibility cannot be separated from the testing of hypothesis: Studying society in a scientific, experimental way means interfering with the course of events. There can hardly be value-free social inquiry and experimentation. The university has attempted

to preserve an apparent neutrality and detachment by segregating its own activities in the social sciences into scholarly and service functions. It has carried out supposedly value-free research in its academic departments and has done its practical interaction with society by lending its talents and know-how to outside agencies—government, industry, foundations, or other institutions.

Such segregation of functions provides only the appearance of a value-free, "scientific" atmosphere in the social sciences. Most social science theory and research rests on unstated ethical assumptions. In a stable society, the prevailing unanimity of social values makes it easier to ignore the implicit assumptions. But when the supposed unanimity breaks down and deep divisions become apparent within society, the range of value choices is wider and the implications of these choices are clearer. The illusion of a value-free position becomes untenable.

At such times, many of the service activities of social scientists stand revealed as *de facto* participation in the practices of the social Establishment. Likewise, the academic critics of the *status quo*, hesitant to involve the supposedly neutral university in controversial social experiments, can exercise their role as experts only within agencies or groups committed to social reform. Thus, the insistence that the university preserve a value-free intellectual environment leads to a displacement of the active, creative market place of ideas away from the university.

The consequences of this displacement affect the content and the course of social experimentation. When carried out by agencies committed to specific social theories, it tends to avoid self-criticism and to generate self-fulfilling predictions. If this experimentation were done by diverse scholars from within the university, as an integral part of professional research, it could more easily be carried out in a spirit of intellectual integrity and mutual criticism, with awareness of the underlying assumptions, willingness to accept results that contradict the assumptions, and commitment to full disclosure of findings and conclusions. The findings of experimentation in social affairs done under such conditions would be more easily interpretable to the public at large, who in the last instance must make the relevant choices.

Restraints on the university from open independent participation in social experiment are numerous: faculty tradition of scholarly detachment, administrative concern over financial support, and trustees' conservative interpretation of their responsibility. En-

couragement of greater participation, on the other hand, comes from many sources: pressures of the local communities reacting to the impact of the universities on their economic and social life; demands of socially deprived groups claiming their share of education and services; and prodding by concerned groups of students and faculty committed to the search for effective solutions to social ills.

Inevitably, students' misgivings against society translate themselves into criticism of the academic community. Interestingly enough, student critics object not only to the university's pretended detachment from pressing social problems and to its actual participation in the activities of society's Establishment, but also to the "neutral," scholarly approach in much of their social science education. These criticisms ought to be heeded because they have much to offer in a constructive direction. At its best, student criticism is not a nihilist reaction to an affluent society, but a demand for integrity of purpose and for more unity between theory and practice, both in the university and in society. In the United States, student unrest is not so much a revolt against traditional values as a revulsion against a society that at times seems to betray its own proclaimed values.

Is it possible for the university to find a response that recognizes the legitimacy of the new challenges and yet preserves both the structure of the university as a viable institution and the integrity of its intellectual and educational mission?

The concept of a critical and constructive experimentation in the area of social inquiry may offer a positive answer by providing a kind of "engagement" (in the sense of the French word *engagement*) different from that of partisan action groups or political parties. The university may use critical experimentation in social situations in order to find out what approaches are effective in altering such situations and what results are to be expected from such actions. Such experimentation may take place within the university itself—for instance, in creating educational and employment opportunities. The recent beginnings toward developing and promoting experimental programs for black and other minority students are obvious examples; much more can be done in this and similar areas. External experimentation may involve, for example, organizing economic or political structures directed at the solution of specific community problems.

Once the university accepts a responsibility to experiment in

the process of social change, its educational role also takes on new dimensions. In a return to the true humanistic and Socratic traditions, the university can train its students to explore and evaluate, in a meaningful societal setting, the consequences of specific choices and decisions. The insulating partitions between learning, teaching, and acting in the real world become less rigid, and the intellectual enterprise acquires a new, more integrated character.

Factual knowledge obtained in active experimentation and providing a rational basis for decision-making can even contribute a source of personal values. In the same way that being part of the process of biological evolution confers biological meaning to the life of individual organisms, being part of the intellectual enterprise as a rational source of social decision as well as of transmissible knowledge confers meaning to the life of the individual man. By fostering participation of its students in the human enterprise as intellectually trained and socially involved individuals, the university can contribute more effectively to their personal development.

The involvement of the university in social experimentation within the framework of rigorous intellectual inquiry is important in another respect. In the complaints recently raised against the universities, one hears much talk of the need for relevance. This is too often interpreted as a demand that scholars, scientists, and students relinquish the pursuits of "purely intellectual content" and engage in other, more immediately applied tasks. Coupled with this demand is a rising criticism of the natural sciences (as sources of a technology whose anarchistic applications threaten human society) as well as of the humanities (as some sort of bead-game played by parasitic inhabitants of the ivory tower). Criticism of natural science is particularly disturbing when it takes the form of anti-rationalism, rejecting the most valuable content of the intellectual tradition because it has failed to solve the social problems that arise from the technological revolution. Yet it may well be that only a rational application of a scientific social technology tested by experiment can solve the problems that arise from industrial technology.

The university can make a meaningful response to the criticism of its scholarly activities neither by kowtowing apologetically to all faddistic pressures nor by assuming an attitude of supercilious indifference. It must be responsibly involved in the affairs

of society, in the dual role of scientific experimenter and custodian of the integrity of the intellectual enterprise. Thus the university responds to the challenge by becoming purposefully and actively engaged in the adventure of the social process.

How can the governance of the university foster a lively, critical, constructive "engagement" in the activities of an evolving society? There is a role to be played by every group in the university community. Student involvement in the decision-making process as well as in the actual day-to-day machinery of university operation is already becoming widespread and is needed to make the university responsive to the problems of present and future generations. Faculty initiative is more necessary than ever to preserve in such a university the rigorous process of intellectual integrity and to assure that all university activities retain the educational and evaluative content too often lost sight of in the passive kinds of service activities. The trustees, if their role is to endure and to be a useful one, must see as their trust the preservation of community support to the university even when the latter makes itself a gadfly of society and even an active participant in social experimentation.

We are all too familiar with the concern that radical students may destroy the university in the process of trying to change society, the university being the societal structure most readily available to their criticisms and vulnerable to inside disruption. But, in fact, the university is worth preserving for the very purposes proclaimed by the radical reformers. In our society, the university may be the most effective structure through which intellectual forces can be put to use in influencing the course of social evolution in a rational way. In order to be effective in this role and to prove its critics wrong, however, the university may have to assume responsibilities and attitudes different from its traditional ones.